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ABSTRACT

Four features characterize the current global scene in mass communications: (1) an imbalance of resources between industrialized and developing countries, (2) an imbalance of information flow between countries, (3) an irrelevance of media content to the social and cultural problems of the Third World, and (4) a considerable impact on the operation of the mass media by the type of social system in a country. The present is a time of great potential for the development of more effective mass media. In order to realize this potential, a reappraisal of past theories and practices, as well as a realization of the interrelationship between political, economic, and communications systems, is needed. (STS)

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MASS MEDIA AND DEVELOPING NATIONS: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE PRESENT STATE OF MASS COMMUNICATION AND ITS RESEARCH

Kaarle Nordenstreng

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- Mass Media and Developing Nations:

A Global Perspective of the Present State of Mass Communication and Its Research

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How should we characterize the current global scene in mass communication, particularly from the point of view of the socalled developing countries?

As far as the actual process of mass communication is concerned, at least four features stand out in a global perspective.

First, there is the well-known imbalance of resources between large industrialised countries and the so-called have-nots, which include besides the Third World also a number of smaller industrialised countries. Material and mental resources for the production and distribution of all manner of information have concentrated in the same centres as most of the world's economic, military and political power. The distribution of communication resources in the world is strikingly disproportionate to the distribution of population and the informational needs of the peoples. Out of the abundance of hard data indicating this situation, one example may suffice in illustration: our world uses paper for communication purposes at an average rate of some fifteen kilograms per person per annum (of this almost half is newsprint); in actual fact, however, a North American consumes as much as sixty kilos, the average African just 1.5 kilos./1/

Bound up with this imbalance of resources is a second central feature in the global communications scene: the imbalance of flow between countries and particularly between few dominant western powers and most of the nations of the Third World. Quantitatively it may be estimated that the total flow of communication taking place between the industrialised part of the world (inhabited by some one third of mankind) and the Third World (comprising about two thirds) takes place at least a hundred times more in the direction from industrialised to developing countries than vice versa. Television programming is typical of this "one-way street" principle: the streams of heavy traffic flow one way only./2/

It is further to be noted that extensions of communication technology to the developing parts of the world have not generally resulted in more balanced information flows between these and the industrialised countries. For instance satellites have up to now only confirmed the traditional patterns of flow, and future prospects afford not only educational and social promises such as exemplified by the current American Rocky Mountain and Indian experiments with direct broadcasting satellites but – perhaps most strikingly – what was recently echoed by the American publication Advertising Age (May 20, 1974) under the title "Direct satellite-to-receiver tv will spur Third World advertising": "The real significance of satellite tv broadcasting for a developing nation is that it permits a broadcaster to assemble a market from scattered communities and scattered households, with adequate purchasing power to be interesting, that no ground antenna network could economically reach."

Not unrelated to the quantitative imbalance are the qualitative aspects of the messages which the mass media are transmitting to audiences in the developing countries. The third feature characterizing today's world scene in this field might be called irrelevance of content to the social and cultural problems encountered by these countries. Luis Beltran, in his contribution to this Conference, calls this feature the "non-developmental mass media content", and for Latin America gives an abundance of research evidence supporting the dubious nature of media contents, for instance this: "Studies specifically concerned with mass communication as related to rural development have found that even those messages specially addressed to farmers are geared – in content and form – exclusively to a minority among these, the city-based large land-owners." John Lent, again concludes in his paper: ". . . whereas in colonial societies media were used by elite colonialists to keep abreast of happenings in the mother country and of other colonialists, in the post-independence period media were used by native elites and white-collar groups to communicate with other elites and white-collar groups." On the other hand, as Beltran further points out, advertising and other popular material addressed to wide masses is of vital importance in the process of ". . . instilling in the population values alien to the national cultures, stimulating irrational buying behavior and inducing evasion of reality and an uncritical conformity with the status quo."

Such a situation is clearly in harmony with certain interests within or outside society, and in fact it might be misleading to call this feature "irrelevance" since any media output is functional to some social forces. It is from the point of view of the development process itself that the media contents are globally speaking problematic if not devastating. Some of us might not like to make such a rough evaluation of the media performance – some even prefer an academic abstension from all consideration of the contents because they thing "freedom of the press"

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would be at risk – but we should note that it is impossible to stand aloof, for after all content is the core of communication. When a communication researcher withdraws himself from a critical evaluation of media content – e.g. by labelling it "moralizing" – he is indeed taking a stand on the issue: on the side of the status quo, against change and for the politico-economic power structures which have created the present situation.

The fourth notable feature in the current world arena of mass communications is the fundamental difference that the social system of a country makes for the operation of the mass media. The world today is divided not only into industrial and developing countries but also into capitalist and socialist societies. Accordingly, developing countries may be classified in two broad categories: those in the capitalist line of development and those in the non-capitalist or socialist. The three previous features mostly apply to the capitalist part of the Third World only – as indeed most of the communication research carried out (at least in western countries) tends to be limited to the capitalist countries.

About a third of the world's population lives today in a socialist society, and the number and political importance of the developing countries which have chosen the non-capitalist road is increasingly significant. We researchers – at least we from capitalist countries – know very little about mass media conditions in socialist countries. Two observations can still be made concerning the non-capitalist developing countries. First, the problems implied in the above-mentioned three global features, and particularly the problem of the developmental relevance of media contents, are certainly less marked and easier to cope with in a socialist system – many of these problems are simply a consequence of the capitalist market economy itself. Secondly, socialist development from a feudal or colonial-capitalist oasis can hardly take place without problems around the mass media: even if the anarchic planning and the profit-oriented management of the capitalist media systems have been replaced by rational planning and socially determined media systems, a satisfactory functioning of the mass media along the non-capitalist way of development does imply serious dilemmas, if evidently less fundamental than those faced under conditions of capitalism. The papers of Anwar Al-Ghassani and Lotfi Nassif illuminate these problems with Arab countries of the non-capitalist order as examples. For instance, Al-Ghassani argues that despite the change in socio-economic system the basic attitude towards the media has remained unchanged: "One can even say that the elimination of private property in the media helped the parties and the state (the latter in particular) to exercise a direct administrative control on the media instead of promoting the free development of the media and introducing a radical change in character and function of such an important institution... This way of dealing with the media stands against the very principle of the national democratic revolution which the leading forces themselves propagate."

By and large, inadequacy may be a proper overall term to characterize the present mass media institutions and their operation seen in a global perspective and particularly from the point of view of the developing countries. This overall evaluation of the mass media, it should be noted, is not based on careless subjective opinions but on a comprehensive consideration of objective conditions. It is another matter that many of those critics of the present media who do not set out from a scientific analysis but rather from political, religious or other "moralizing" viewpoints are equally convinced of their current inadequacy and sometimes in fact end up with arguments similar to those above.

The latter, less scientific and more moralizing concern about the functioning of today's mass communications should not be overlooked as another ill-grounded flood of political or moral propaganda. Rather it is an indication of yet another central feature in today's global scene: a growing awareness of the objective problems concerned, problems such as those listed above. We communication researchers and media practitioners are not alone in our concern for the present and future policies of the media: there is a growing number of serious politicians and a widening circle of enlightened public opinion basically sharing our analytical point of view. The more determined and public formulation of comprehensive national communication policies is a manifestation of this development, as is the increased attention given to international communication policies within the framework of the United Nations and not least Unesco, for instance in their debates and decisions on direct broadcasting satellites.

As a concrete demonstration of this growing awareness let me point out that in its Medium-Term Plan for 1977–1982, to be approved by the forthcoming eighteenth General Conference, Unesco significantly suggests that the traditional concept of free flow of information "needs to be complemented by that of a more balanced and objective flow, both between countries and within and between regions". Furthermore, we have been witnessing in recent times a critical re-evaluation of the free flow concept even by top policians such as the head of a non-aligned state: Just as within Finland there is a situation in the press described as a bourgeois hegemony, on the international arena there is a state of affairs called communication imperialism... Could it be that the prophets who preach unhindered communication are not concerned with equality between nations, but are on the side of the stronger and wealthier? ... More and more it can be seen that a more liberalistic freedom of communication is not in everyday reality a neutral ideal, but a way in which an enterprise with many resources at its disposal has greater opportunities than weaker brethren to make its own hegemony accepted..."/3/

Besides such growing political and public awareness of the objective problems involved in mass communications, another feature characteristic of evaluations of the situation deserves mention here, namely a manifest deepening of analysis. This trend is noticeable in the holistic approach – or "total system approach" as it is called by Herbert Schiller/4/ – now

increasingly taking precedence over the atomistic approach of fragmentary studies just as advocated by Unesco's Proposals for an International Programme of Communication Research (COM.MD/20) published three years ago. Concomitant with the deepening of analysis in such a wide perspective is naturally an increased importance attached to social and economic factors in describing and explaining communication phenomena. On a global scale this means that communication flows and structures are basically seen as another component of the world economic system. Thus also the term "communication imperialism" should not be understood as referring to a separate phenomenon but rather as a particular aspect of a single mechanism of imperialism determined by economic relations between nations (and socio-economic relations within them).

In fact we have a paradoxical situation whereby communication research, which by its very nature is concerned with the processing and cultivation of the human consciousness, is building increasingly on material factors and seems thereby to be more and more merging with a general study of society in a sociological, economic or political context. Seen against past research tradition this trend may well be welcome in eliminating an undue self-sufficiency in communication research as something unique and separate from other social sciences, and also introducing more materialistic elements in a field which in the western hemisphere has been particularly biased towards an idealistic philosophical orientation.

It is not our task here to discuss in detail such trends in research tradition and to seek explanations for changes in research policy. However, in the present context we should note that economic and material factors are breaking through not only in communication research but in the social sciences in general and indeed in practically all fields of public policy. A few years ago the industrialised section of the capitalist world was still quite confidently looking to the future and generating ideologies, including much social-scientific research, mainly concerned with the psychological well-being or quality of life of those living in a welfare society with a fairly stable and ever-expanding economico-material basis. No longer so at this time of "record" inflation and unemployment, industrial disputes and strikes of an extent never experienced before, oil and currency crises as well as social problems of crime, narcotics etc. Currently not only Marxist observers but bourgeois experts as well say that world capitalism is being shaken by an overall crisis the roots of which lie in material and economic problems rather than having mental origins as for example in communication phenomena.

Consequently, the preoccupation of political decision-makers as well as social scientists seems at least in western industrialised countries to be returning to the analysis and control of vital socio-economic problems. The same trend is amplified on a global scale by the Third World's willingness to view population problems as a matter of socio-economic development instead of an issue of birth control (including information campaigns for birth control), as was recently evidenced in the World Population Conference in Bucharest.

Yet it would be fatally wrong to conclude that matters of communication and human consciousness have at this historical stage ceased to be of importance in society and the world in general. Paradoxical as it may first appear, current tendencies in the world have if anything increased the significance of mass communication for the development of the social system, in industrialised as well as developing countries. Since the material problems encountered by the world today are largely the consequence of a politico-economic system, it is only natural that an ideological battle in the human mind has become more strategically important.

As researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and educators in the field of mass communications we will certainly have an increasingly central role to play in the development of the world during the critical years to come. In order to meet the challenge, however, we need a serious reappraisal of past theories and practices. For instance, in studies on social change the ahistorical view of development has to be abandoned which, as Peter Golding has pointed out, sees developing countries "emerging form static isolation, requiring an external stimulus to shake them into the twentieth century" and conceives their "future as a bigger version of the present, the liberal theory of progress; modernism is the accumulation of more consumer goods and the adoption of values and ideals tried in the western world"./5/

We need more genuinely historical research accompanied by studies of the process of mass communication carried out in the context of political science and macro-economics (as exemplified by Dallas Smythe's paper at this Conference). We need unprejudiced programmes and measures for communication policies both in industrialised and developing countries of a capitalist as well as socialist order (as asserted e. g. in Nabil Dajani's paper). And we need new models of journalism training in order better to serve the pressing needs of the developing countries (relevant examples provided in the papers of Sonja Brie and Franz Faber). We are aware of the broad directions of change: "The obvious alternatives, of course, are local ownership, indigenous contents, locally trained personnel and use of native language and culture," to take another quotation from Lent's paper. This indeed is easier said than realized, but we do still have a number of more practical recommendations given e. g. by various expert meetings (such as the Symposium on the international flow of television programms held at Tampere, Finland, in May 1973/6/). We are no doubt only at the beginning of a long road, and much more detailed work is needed – mobilized by occasions like this Conference. In any case it seems to me that communication research has never before possessed such a potential to contribute to the solution of social problems, since this field of study has by now succeeded fairly well in identifying its scientific and socio-political context and significantly adopting a policy-oriented and progressive "research philosophy". And what is equally important in an international perspective, our field, like any

human activity, may benefit from the current process of normalization or detente taking place in political relations between most countries despite all the crises the world still faces. This very Conference held here in Leipzig is a manifestation of increased international cooperation across different social systems and I think also of a recognition in principle that information flows should serve the mutual understanding of the peoples and the cause of peace.

In fact this would seem an appropriate occasion to repeat what was stated almost a year ago in the World Conference of Peace Forces in Moscow, attended by over one thousand national parties and organisations from a wide political scale, in the final document of the commission on cooperation in the field of education, culture and mass media:

"We have met in a period when the success of the policy of peaceful coexistence offers better opportunities than men have ever had before them for expanding and strengthening cooperation between nations in the field of culture and education in the interests of consolidating world peace and safeguarding the just cause of freedom and national independence of peoples.

The time has come to continue with greater effort a constructive dialogue among representatives of various cultural and educational fields in order to eliminate mutual misunderstandings, the efforts and relapses of the cold war which interfere with normal mutual exchange and cooperation of cultures."/7/

Footnotes

1 Unesco Statistical Yearbook 1972 (Paris 1973).

2 Unesco: Television traffic – a one-way street? Reports and Papers on Mass Communication No. 70/1974).

3 Urho Kekkonen: "The free flow of information: Toward a reconsideration of national and international communication policies", in Unesco (1974, see above), p. 44–45.

4 See Schiller's contribution in Unesco (1974), p. 49.

5 Peter Golding: "Media role in national development: Critique of a theoretical orthodoxy", Journal of Communication, Summer 1974, pp. 51–52.

6 See Unesco (1974), pp. 59–60.

7 See e. g. The Democratic Journalist, 1/1974, p. 7.

Summary

The author proceeded from four features characterizing the process of mass communication. The first is the imbalance of resources between the big industrial countries and those of the Third World and a number of smaller industrial countries. He pointed out that the distribution of communication resources is grossly at variance with the distribution of the population and informational needs. Secondly he noted the imbalance in the flow of information especially between the dominant countries of the West and most countries of the Third World. The third characteristic feature cited by the author was the irrelevance of content for the social and cultural problems facing the developing countries. In this context he pointed out the function played by the media for the benefit of the ruling circles in those countries. He said that social order of a given country was crucial for the activities of the mass media. This is the fourth feature. Proceeding form the existence of both socialist and capitalist states, the author cited the classification of the developing countries into those which have taken the capitalist road of development and those taking the non-capitalist or socialist road. The three characteristic features mentioned first essentially apply only to the capitalist section of the Third World. The author made the following statements concerning the non-capitalist developing countries: Many of the above problems are a consequence of the capitalist market economy itself, therefore, they are less pronounced and easier to control in a socialist order. Thus the parties and the state are provided with some sort of direct control of the media, which, in the author's view, hampers the free development of the media. The speaker pointed out that there is a growing awareness of these problems. In this connection the speaker mentioned the suggestion of UNESCO that the traditional concept of the free flow of information "must be supplemented by a more balanced and objective flow both between the individual countries and within the regions and between them".

Also important is, in his view, a deepening of the analysis of communication by the total system approach. In the description and explanation of communication phenomena social economic factors have growing significance. That means that communication flows and patterns must basically be regarded as another component of the economic systems of the world. The principal activity of the political decision-makers and social scientists in the industrial countries of the West seems, therefore, to consist in a return to an analysis and control of vital socio-economic problems. The author stressed that an ideological struggle of the human mind has acquired increasing strategic importance since the material problems of the world are largely the consequence of a political and economic system. According to the